

Mamet on Auditions

A special guest post from David Mamet's [True and False](#). The discussion is notionally about acting, but it applies far more broadly. Try substituting "programmer" for "actor", for example.

Those with "something to fall back on" invariably fall back on it. They intended to all along. That is why they provided themselves with it. But those with no alternative see the world differently. [...]

Those of you with nothing to fall back on, you will find, *are* home.

(34-36)

The audition process selects for the most blatant (and not even the most attractive) of the supplicants. As a hiring tool, it is geared to reject all but the hackneyed, the stock, the predictable—in short, the counterfeit.

[...]

The producers are not interested in discovering the new. Who in their right mind would bet twenty million dollars on an untried actor? They want the old—and if they cannot have it, they want its facsimile.

These gatekeepers understand their job to be this: to supply the appropriate, predictable actor for the part. They base their choice on the actor's appearance, credits, and quote—as if they were hiring a plumber.

If this sounds tedious, reflect that the actor himself is habituated into the process and endorses it from his first experience of it. And his first experience is the school.

The acting school and its lessons are many times harsh, but their rigor and extent is comfortable and predictable. The lessons of the stage, on the other hand, are often devastating and almost beyond bearing.

The school, like the audition process, has a clear and simple structure of commands and rewards. If, and as long as, the student propitiates the teacher, she may be disappointed but she will rarely be humiliated. To the extent that she internalizes her subscription to the system ("It is harsh, but I know in my heart it is just, or at the very least, unavoidable") she can enjoy freedom from anomie. If she never ventures out of the confines of the system, she can live, whether employed or unemployed, free from terror.

Teachers of "audition technique" counsel actors to consider the audition itself the performance, and to gear all one's hopes and aspirations not toward the actual practice of one's craft (which takes place in front of an audience or a camera), but toward the possibility of appealing to some functionary. What could be more awful?

For much of the beauty of the theatre, and much of the happiness, is in a communion with the audience. The audience comes to the show prepared to respond as a communal unit. They come prepared (and expecting) to be surprised and delighted. They are not only willing, but disposed to endorse the unusual, the honest, the piquant. Everything the audition process discards.

[...]

Don't "confess" when you come offstage. If you have gained an insight, *use* it. They say "silence builds a fence for wisdom." To keep one's own counsel is difficult. "Oh, how terrible I was..." How difficult to keep those words in—how comforting they are. In saying them one creates an imaginary group interested in one's progress. But give up the comfort of an imaginary group. This "group" that is judging you is not real; you invented it to make yourself feel less alone.

I knew a man who went to Hollywood and languished jobless for a period of years. A talented actor. And he got no work. He came back at the end of the period and lamented, "I would have been all right if they'd just sat me down on day one and explained the rules."

Well, so would we all. But who are "they"? And what are the rules? There *is* no "they," and there are no rules. He posited the existence of a rational hierarchical group acting in a reasonable manner.

But show business is and has always been a depraved carnival. Just as it attracts the dedicated, it attracts the rapacious and exploitative, and these parasites can never be pleased, they can only be submitted to. But why would one want to submit to them?

The audience, on the other hand, *can* be pleased. They come to the show to be pleased, and they *will* be pleased by the honest, the straightforward, the unusual, the intuitive—all those things, in short, which dismay both the teacher and the casting agent.

Keep your wits about you. It is not necessary to barter your talent, your self-esteem, and your youth for the *chance* of pleasing your inferiors. It is more frightening *but it is not less productive* to go your own way, to form your own theatre company, to write and stage your *own* plays, to make your *own* films. You have an enormously greater chance of eventually presenting yourself to, and eventually appealing to, an audience by striking out on your own, by making your *own* plays and films, than by submitting to the industrial model of the school and studio.

But how will you act when you, whether occasionally or frequently, come up against the gatekeepers?

Why not do the best you can, see them as, if you will, an inevitable and preexisting condition, like ants at a picnic, and shrug and enjoy yourself in spite of them.

Do not internalize the industrial model. You are not one of the myriad of interchangeable pieces but a unique human being and if you've got something to say, *say* it, and think well of yourself while you're learning to say it better.

(44-51)

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